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ABSTRACT

The Down East Partnership for Children (DEPC) was established in 1993 to bring together health, education, and social service agencies to address the needs of children and families in two eastern North Carolina counties. As the staff grew from 2 to 20 and communication within and outside the Partnership became more complex, an analysis of internal and external communication patterns identified strategies for organizational development. Heightened awareness of formal and information networks and recognition of needs to coordinate contacts with clients and other agencies helped the staff improve the way they worked with each other and with their stakeholder groups. The analysis of internal and external communication patterns was a useful component of the evaluation of this interagency partnership and helped staff members understand some of the challenges of their boundary spanning roles. Program monitoring was used for evaluation and management. The information regarding communication patterns was used by the staff in their strategic planning process. This technique for describing communication patterns and examining boundary spanning roles can be used for program monitoring in other settings, including educational arenas. An appendix presents the evaluation survey, which asks staff members to list the people they most frequently contacted during a typical month. (Contains 3 figures and 15 references.) (Author/SLD)

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Abstract

The Down East Partnership for Children (DEPC) was established in 1993 to bring together health, education, and social services agencies to address the needs of children and families in two Eastern North Carolina counties. As the staff grew from two to 20 and communication within and outside the Partnership became more complex, an analysis of internal and external communication patterns identified strategies for organizational development. Heightened awareness of formal and informal networks and recognition of needs to coordinate contacts with clients and other agencies helped the staff improve the way they worked with each other and with their stakeholder groups.

The analysis of internal and external communication patterns was a useful component of the evaluation of this interagency partnership and helped staff members understand some of the challenges of their boundary spanning roles. Program monitoring was used for evaluation and management. The information regarding communication patterns was used by the staff in their strategic planning process.

This technique for describing communication patterns and examining boundary spanning roles can be used for program monitoring in other settings. The results helped boundary spanners in this partnership understand the challenges of their roles and develop strategies for improved communication with internal and external stakeholders.

Boundary Spanning and Communication Patterns in Interagency Partnerships

Lynn K. Bradshaw

Partnerships and collaboration, often associated with the business community, are gaining recognition as strategies for reform in the way education, business, and human services agencies and organizations do business individually and with each other (Cordiero & Kolek, 1996). Health and social issues impact a child's education. As the responsibility for these issues has shifted from the federal government toward states and local communities, Smart Start funds have provided incentives and support for action in North Carolina communities. This program initiated by Governor James B. Hunt, Jr. aims to assure that every child in the state has access to affordable high quality education and health care.

Within this context for change, the Down East Partnership for Children (DEPC) was established in 1993. The DEPC brought together health, education, and social services agencies to address the needs of children and families in two Eastern North Carolina counties. The DEPC mission is to ensure that every child and family in Nash and Edgecombe Counties receive the education, health care, and social services necessary to have a good quality of life and to achieve economic success. The creation of the Partnership has been a collaborative involving stakeholder groups from two Eastern North Carolina counties: parents, teachers, school districts, colleges, libraries, social services, health agencies, businesses, local government, and other leaders. These committed citizens are working to develop and sustain a new service delivery paradigm – "a comprehensive, family-friendly continuum of services."

Although the first Edgecombe-Nash Smart Start proposal was not funded, the DEPC moved ahead and incorporated in December 1993 without a known source of continuing funding. The first two DEPC employees were hired in January 1994 to begin the Child Resource and Referral Program, and an executive director was hired in July 1994. In September 1996, the DEPC moved out of incubation space provided by the Nash-Rocky Mount Schools into its own facility, the former YWCA building in

downtown Rocky Mount. By December 1996, only three years after incorporation, the DEPC had become an organization with a staff of 19 who worked with hundreds of Board and committee members and subcontractors and administered a budget of more than four million state and federal dollars.

The purpose of this paper is to describe an initial effort to examine the internal and external communication patterns of the staff of the Down East Partnership for Children as a way to help staff better understand and manage their boundary spanning roles and accomplish organizational goals. The project was consistent with principles of empowerment evaluation (Fetterman, 1996). The evaluation process was collaborative, and the purpose was to help the staff understand and gain control of their behaviors in the organization and in the larger community. Collaboration theory is reviewed first, with a special emphasis on organizational boundary spanners. The methodology is described, and the results are presented. Conclusions and possible next steps complete this report.

Collaboration Theory

Some theories of collaboration distinguish between collaboration and cooperation, but Wood and Gray (1991) prefer a more inclusive definition: "Collaboration occurs when a group of autonomous stakeholders of a problem domain engage in an interactive process, using shared rules, norms, and structures, to act or decide on issues related to that domain" (p. 146). The collaborative process is developmental (for example, see Gray, 1985; Hord, 1986; Melaville & Blank, 1993; Reed & Cedja, 1987; Wood & Gray, 1991; and Rigsbee, Reynolds, & Wang, 1995). While "steps" may differ in name and number, there tends to be general agreement that collaborative efforts progress through three stages of activity: (1) the definition of a shared problem, (2) "direction setting" or planning, and (3) implementation or "structuring." The early stages of a collaborative effort are critical to its success (Reed & Cedja, 1987). Cordiero and Kolek noted the importance of "making and nurturing connections, constantly scanning the environment for opportunities that match identified needs, waiting for the time to be right politically, and planting seeds in several 'fields'" (1996, p. 10). It is important that stakeholders recognize the complexity of the problem and the interdependence of the organizations that are undertaking the joint effort. During "direction setting," stakeholders work

together to gather information and develop a strategic plan. As the plan takes shape, power should be distributed to allow all stakeholders to influence decisions about the collaborative effort. With implementation, structures and processes needed to accomplish shared goals are established. An "enablement framework" must assure funding and communication linkages, and as the collaborative evolves, environmental scanning and adaptation must continue (Reed & Cedja, 1987).

Organizational boundaries define organizations and departments within organizations. Boundaries regulate the flow of information between an organization and its environment and between organizational departments. Individuals who operate at the interface of those boundaries are referred to as "boundary spanners." These individuals are seen as sources of external information (Katz & Tushman, 1979) and as keys to the organization's ability to cope with external constraints (Aldrich & Herker, 1977 in Dollinger, 1984, p. 353). Throughout the life of a collaborative effort, "boundary-spanners" communicate frequently within and across organizational boundaries and engage in a variety of activities including filtering, transacting, buffering, representing, and protecting (Adams, 1976 in Dollinger, 1984, p. 352).

Boundary spanning activities differ according to the content of communication and the degree of information processing required. Katz and Tushman (1979) distinguished between boundary spanning communication that was administrative or problem-solving in content. There can also be differences in the way boundary spanners are and need to be linked to organizations. For example, representational boundary spanning activities concerned with resource acquisition and disposal involve substantial external contacts, but few internal links. Informational boundary spanning, on the other hand, requires strong internal and external links (Tushman & Scanlan, 1981). Boundary-spanners may emerge spontaneously, and they can also be developed. Eisenberg (1995) suggests that organizations should identify boundary-spanning individuals, recognize their "power," provide appropriate training and development, and involve them in planning and implementing the organization's collaborative agenda.

Methodology

Continuous evaluation of the DEPC has had a dual purpose: (1) to examine the effectiveness of the partnership and its component parts and (2) to promote organizational and staff development. One component of the evaluation of the DEPC was an examination of staff members' communication patterns within and beyond the Partnership.

In order to identify internal and external communication patterns among DEPC staff and their clients, staff members were asked to identify three groups of individuals:

- people outside DEPC they contact most frequently during a typical month,
- people outside DEPC who contact them most frequently during a typical month, and
- people within DEPC (staff, board, committees, board members, committee members, and others) with whom they have the most contact during a typical month.

Three diagrams were developed using the survey results to show communication patterns within and beyond DEPC:

- Communication with the Board and Technical Support Agencies
- Communication with the Community, and
- Communication within the Partnership.

The number beside each arrow indicates the number of staff who reported that contact as one of their most frequent. Naturally, the number of arrows and contacts are higher for Family Resource and Child Care Resource and Referral where more staff members are "located." For this activity, the focus was on the number of staff members interacting with contact persons, not on the total number of interactions in a month.

The results are limited in several ways. The data were collected only one time, and the names and terms used for contacts were not standardized. Staff members who did not return the survey are not represented in the diagrams. However, the results illustrated communication patterns within and across organizational boundaries. They provided the basis for an initial discussion about possible "overlaps" and "gaps" in communication patterns which helped staff begin to ask questions about the flow of information within and beyond the Partnership and develop strategies for improvement.

Results

The results of the surveys provided a basis for discussion of three sets of communication patterns: communication between staff members and members of the DEPC Board and representatives of technical support agencies, communication between staff members and community representatives, and communication within the partnership. Responses were grouped according to the organizational structures in place at the time of the survey: administrative staff, child care resource and referral (CCR&R), family resource (FR), and information and exchange (I&E). Examples of observations and concerns that were identified in the discussion of the results are provided for each set of communication patterns.

Communication with the Board and Technical Support Agencies

Communication patterns among staff members, Board members, and representatives of technical support agencies are shown in Table 1. Contacts with technical support agencies are concentrated among the administrative staff (administrative assistant, finance officer, and contracts officer). All areas reported some contact with members of the DEPC Board or specific committees. Both administrative and CCR&R staff reported contacts with the NC Division of Child Development. Contacts between the Board and the three program areas (CCR&R, FR, and I&E) appeared to be somewhat balanced except that there was only one employee in I&E. However, because the director of information and exchange worked with the executive director to coordinate the work of the Board's standing committees, the higher number of contacts per person was not unexpected.

The diagram of communication patterns in this area helped staff members understand the difference in responsibilities among the administrative support staff and the program personnel. As the DEPC had grown, budget, financial accounting, office equipment, and employee benefits had required increased attention. At the time of the survey, the move into a new building had required significant attention to the physical plant. This exercise confirmed the need for the administrative roles to support the work of program personnel.

The diagrams also illustrated "shared" contacts. Individuals in two areas contact the NC Division of Child Development regularly, and two administrative staff members reported contacts with insurance companies and vendors. Many staff members reported regular contact with Board and committee members. Staff recognized that it was important to be aware of multiple contacts with the same individuals and groups. Coordination could prevent duplication and ensure a consistent message.

Communication with the Community

Communication between staff members and community representatives is illustrated in Table 2. This diagram highlighted the breadth of DEPC communication sent to and received from community contacts. Even when contacts were grouped, the number of different groups was extensive. Administrative staff, CCR&R, and FR shared contacts with the North Carolina Partnership, other local partnerships, the NC CCR&R Network, and other networks. Staff in both the CCR&R and FR areas reported contacts with parents, child care providers, community colleges, and county agencies. The contacts reported by the director of information and exchange, however, were unique.

Again, staff members recognized the need for awareness, coordination, and consistency when they shared the same contact persons and worked with the same organizations or groups. The discussion clarified the need for effective internal communication, and staff began to realize the effects of their increasing numbers on the internal communication patterns. It was becoming more difficult to talk with each other. Access to the Executive Director and program directors became more difficult, and a communication hierarchy was beginning to be noticed in an organization that had been quite flat.

Communication within the Partnership

Internal communication patterns are illustrated in Table 3. All three program areas communicate with the administrative support staff. CCR&R and FR reported contacts with Information and Exchange, but the director of I&E did not report contact with the other two program areas. Administrative and program staff, except for Family Resource, reported contacts with the Executive Director. The director of the Community Fellows program, who was relatively new to the staff at the time of the survey, reported

contacts with the Family Resource director, to whom she reported, and to the Executive Director.

As noted earlier, in order to maintain effective communication with outside groups, it is critical for staff members to be connected within the organization and to recognize when external contacts overlap. The diagram of communication patterns within the DEPC reveals some noticeable gaps. For the director of information and exchange to respond effectively to community inquiries, she must be well connected and informed within the partnership. In order for the Executive Director to build the capacity of the staff to sustain program innovations without her direct oversight, she needs to become less "visible" in the communication networks. Again, communication patterns within the organization affirmed the work of the administrative staff. While the results focused on groups of employees rather than individuals, it was noteworthy that the administrative assistant had regular contact with most employees and was as important internal link within the organization.

Conclusions

Information is an important commodity in a collaborative setting. In the original DEPC offices, space was "tight" and shared communication was natural. In the new building, private offices, with private baths, and multiple floors were a welcomed luxury, but communication among staff required more thought and effort.

Boundary spanners must be connected and informed. Shared information is essential for staff members to function effectively in boundary spanning roles. Although there is a broad recognition of interrelationships among DEPC activities across administrative groupings and organizational goals (Bradshaw, 1997), the communication diagrams revealed a tendency to confine communication to the administrative work group. In order for the Partnership to function as an integrated system of service delivery, it is essential that all staff members understand and have current information about all programs and activities.

Additional surveys to monitor changes in communication patterns will be helpful, and a closer examination of contacts for each work area would be helpful. The survey approach, which is comfortable and easily understood by DEPC staff members, makes

sense as an empowerment evaluation tool. At some point, however, an empirical examination of communication patterns, using techniques of network analysis, could be used to examine DEPC communication, compare it to communication patterns for other collaboratives, and contribute to theory on organizational collaboration and boundary spanning roles.

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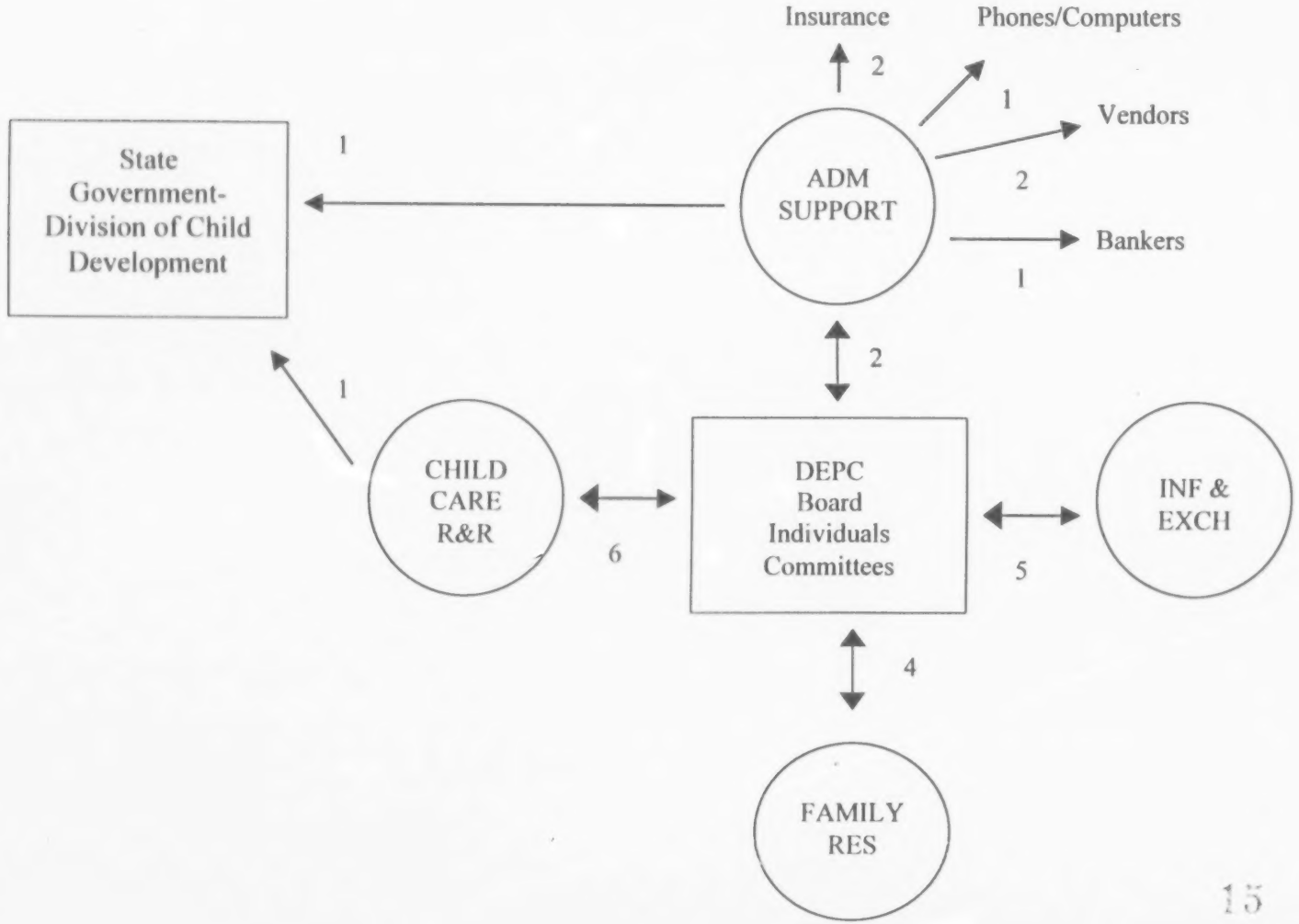
Communication with the Board and Technical Support Agencies



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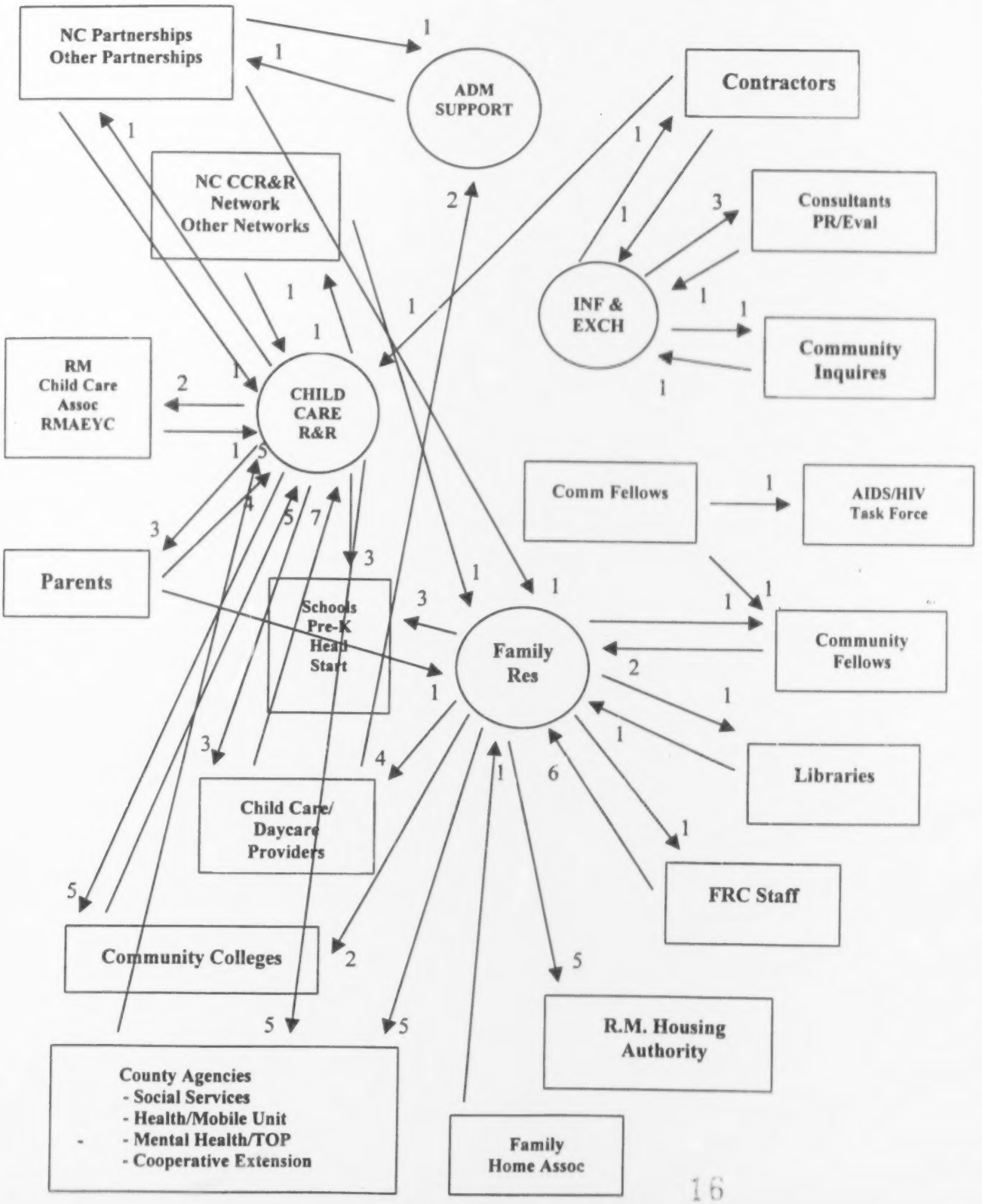
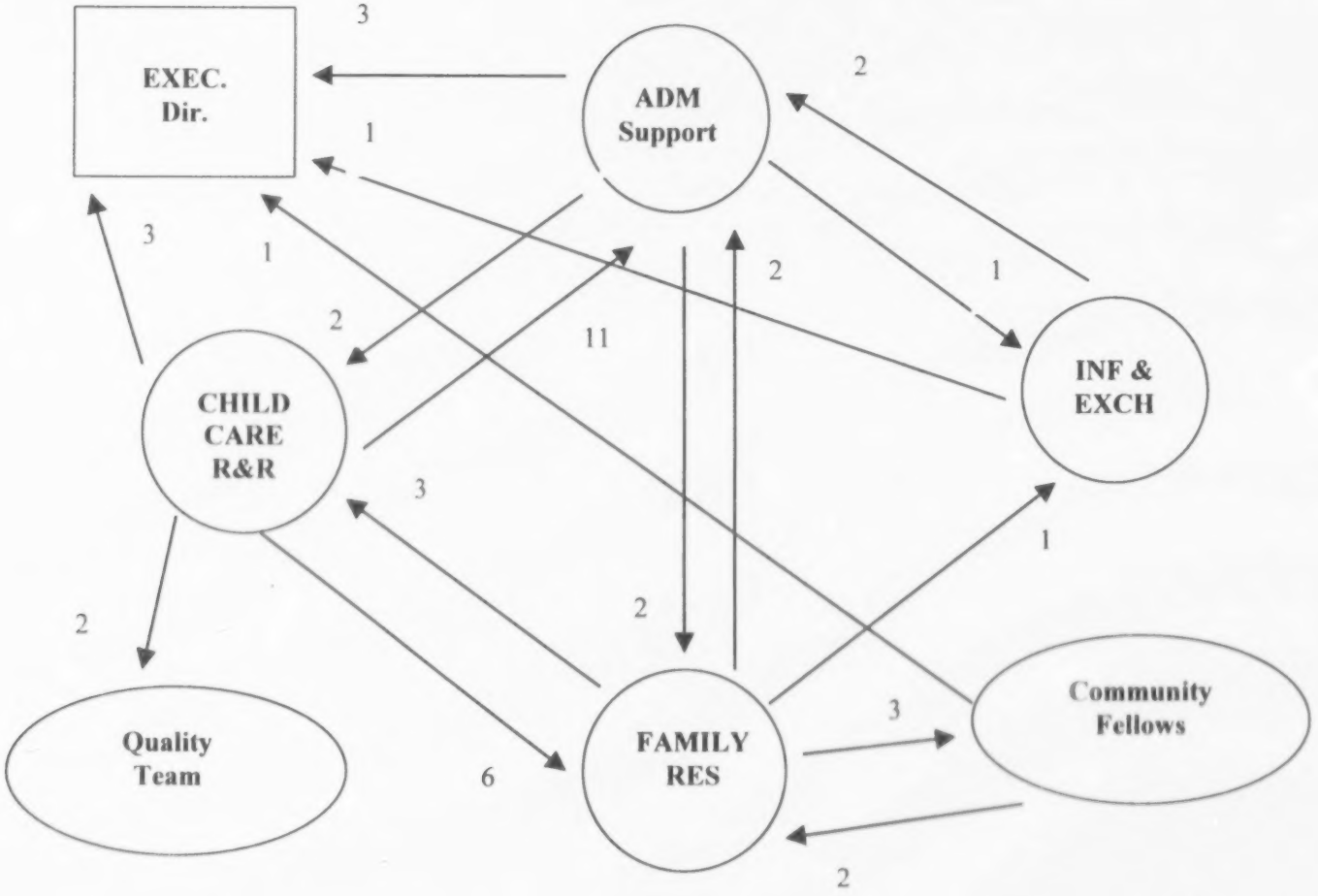
Communication with the Community



Communication within the Partnership



Appendix A

DEPC Evaluation Survey

Communication Networks

NAME:
DATE EMPLOYED BY DEPC:
TITLE/ROLE:
EDUCATION (dates, institution(s), major field(s), and degree(s):
RELATED WORK EXPERIENCE (dates or length of service, agency, and role):

In responding to the next three questions, think about the individuals (or groups of people) with whom you are in contact during a typical month. List your answers in descending order, with the most frequent contact first.

A. List the people outside DEPC you contact most frequently during a typical month.

	Individual (or Group)	Agency (if appropriate)
(Most) 1		
2		
3		
4		
5		
6		
7		
8		
9		
10		

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B. List the people outside DEPC who contact you most frequently during a typical month.

	Individual (or Group)	Agency (if appropriate)
(Most) 1		
2		
3		
4		
5		
6		
7		
8		
9		
10		

C. List the people within DEPC (staff, board, committees, board members, committee members, etc.) with whom you have the most contact during a typical month.

	Individual (or Group)	Agency (if appropriate)
(Most) 1		
2		
3		
4		
5		
6		
7		
8		
9		
10		

Thanks again for your help!

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